

History of Appin Cemetery

Presented by Jim May, August 1, 2000

It is an honour to have been asked to speak at this memorial decoration day about the history of Appin Cemetery. My family has had a long association with Appin Cemetery and history has been a large part of my career. However, preparing for this afternoon has not been without its difficulties. Old books and documents are musty and I have an allergy to old book dust. I will be submitting a bill for antihistamine drugs to the cemetery secretary-treasurer.

No one can say that this memorial decoration day was planned in haste. At the annual meeting of the cemetery board in 1934, a committee was "to investigate the practicability of a decoration day memorial service". Nine years later in 1943, a second committee was named to make arrangements. In 1999, W.E. Carruthers suggested a decoration day. The board decided to enlist the support of Appin United and Presbyterian churches. So you see this day has been in the works for sixty-six years. No wonder it has been so well planned.

Why is there a cemetery on the knoll to the north of Appin? To answer my question I would like to refer you to a passage from the book of Genesis, to chapter twenty-three (23: 2-9, 17-20) and a portion of chapter twenty-five (25: 8-10).

Sarah, Abraham's wife, had just died. And Abraham asked the Hittites to sell him a piece of property for a burial place. The Hittites said use one of our tombs instead. But Abraham persisted. He did not want to borrow a Hittite tomb. He wanted a piece of ground of his own, in that place, set-aside where he and Sarah and his family could be buried. And, the Hittites relented and sold him the field and cave at Machpelah; and there he buried Sarah. When Abraham died his sons, Isaac and Ishmael buried him there. Later Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob's wife Leah were buried there. And much later, when the Hebrews escaped from bondage in Egypt they brought Jacob's body with them from Egypt to be buried at Machpelah.

I think herein lays the answer to my question: Why is there a cemetery at Appin? On January 29, 1914, a group of interested residents of Appin and vicinity met here in this building - the Methodist church- to consider "the procuring of land to establish a cemetery in the vicinity of Appin". I imagine they were motivated by the same human desires that motivated Abraham. They wanted a piece of ground of their own, in their own community where they could bury their family members.

At that meeting in January, 1914 two committees were formed. The first was to obtain "such information as is necessary to the organization of a company... respecting cemeteries". The second was to investigate the "site proposed on the N 1/2 of the S 1/2 of Lot 12, Concession 2"- in other words the sandy knoll just north of Appin.

On February 11, two weeks later, they met again. The site committee reported that the soil and locality were suitable and that four acres could be secured for the cemetery, including roadway from James W. Macfie for \$400.00.

Eleven men agreed to purchase three shares each to form the company at the rate of \$15.00 per share. Those men were: W.T. May, Charles M. Macfie, John W. Macfie, Martin Johnson, James C. Allan, James Lotan, Frank Nicholls, John A. McTaggart, T.H. King, W.R. Stephenson, M.R. Brown. Six of them were Ekfrid farmers, two were Appin merchants, one was a blacksmith, one was a sawyer and one was a cheese maker.

Three days later, February 14, they met again. The company was to be named "The Appin Cemetery Company Limited". They applied to the local and provincial boards of health for approval.

By March 26 the provincial board of health had not yet approved. (Does this sound familiar?) So the cemetery had not yet been opened or the plots staked. However, John Richmond of Ekfrid died and Mrs. Richmond asked to purchase a plot. So, the cemetery shareholders met the next day, March 27, at John Macfie's general store to organize the company. W.T. May was elected as President and Charles N. Macfie as Secretary-Treasurer. The price of a plot (that is eight graves) was set at \$15.00.

The next day, March 28, 1914, John Richmond, the first person to be buried in Appin Cemetery, was interred before the plots had been staked or the leveling of the site even started. There were five more burials that year.

The leveling and staking of plots got underway in 1914 and continued into 1915. In the leveling process, the plots were raised above the roadways. The cemetery was laid out on the following plan "Section I and II from the entrance; Ranges 1, 2, 3 and 4 from the North side; North side plots numbered 1 to 23 in odd numbers, South side plots in even numbers 2 to 24; half plots marked North and South. Plots were first sold in Section II so today the east end is the older part of the cemetery.

In the beginning, annual fees were paid by plot holders to maintain and care for their plots. But the system was not without its flaws. Sometimes the yearly fees fell into arrears and the directors were faced with the decision whether to repossess the plot for non-payment. So, in 1928 the company instituted a system of perpetual care of plots. For the next forty-seven years, there would be both methods of maintenance. Many plot holders chose to purchase "perpetual care". And after 1952 all plots sold in Section I were sold that way. Other plottolders continued to pay a yearly maintenance fee. The last annual maintenance fee was paid in 1976.

I have compiled a list of some of the interesting items about the cemetery — not necessarily in chronological order.

(1) The cemetery board has met in numerous places over the years: The Methodist Church, John Macfie's store, the Orange Hall, the Commercial Hotel, the Ekfrid Mutual Office, Ekfrid Township, the Presbyterian Church, the home of Charlie Macfie when he was incapacitated in later life.

(2) My first real recollection of the cemetery was a phone call in 1951 or 1952, that for some reason has stuck in my mind. It was to my father, probably from my grandfather W.T. May. Could dad come with his truck to help collect up stones for the cemetery gates? Stonemason Frank Clifford built those gates. And I thought you might be interested to know who made donations to build the gates: the Appin Dramatic Club, Appin Women's Institute, Appin Park Association, Ekfrid Township, the Orange Lodge, the Horseshoe Club.

Later in 1974, a wrought iron arch designating Appin Cemetery was added to the stone gates. The arch was designed by Arend Smink and donated by W.T. May.

(3) In Section #2, there are three very large family plots, Johnson, Macfie and May. These date back to the beginning of the cemetery when four of the original shareholders - Martin Johnson, Charles Macfie, John Macfie and W.T. May purchased four plots (that is thirty two graves) for each of their families.

I want to mention a little personal anecdote about these large plots. I hope it is all right to tell a funny story about a cemetery and I hope my daughters won't mind. When our girls were young, Jane and I used to go occasionally for a walk in the cemetery with them. Of course, they were interested in the large plot with their name May. But they also noticed the large Macfie plot beside it. Every time we went for a walk, they would check the headstones in both plots to see who was ahead, the Mays or the Macfies. It was a contest I wasn't interested in taking part in.

(4) On a few headstones, you will see people who died before the cemetery was opened in 1914. Those are re-interments from other cemeteries.

(5) To this date, there have been seven hundred and two burials. In 1926, there were no burials and only one each in 1933 and 1940. The most burials in a year, seventeen, were in 1995 followed by 1970 when there were fifteen.

(6) The Secretary-Treasurer was paid \$10.00 in 1914.

(7) In 1932, there was no annual meeting owing to unfavourable weather and illness.

(8) Where people drive vehicles in the cemetery has long been a problem. In 1918 a sign had to be erected requesting people to keep to the driveways of the cemetery. In 1924, the board decided to string wire to protect plots from cars. I hope we are better drivers today.

(9) In 1919, John Jones was instructed, "to take steps to destroy the groundhogs infesting the cemetery". He was paid \$1.00 for ammunition. He must have had some success because in 1925 he was only paid fifty cents for ammunition. However, groundhogs continued to be a problem because in the 1960's Stewart Pole was still exterminating them.

(10) Ladies have played a role with the cemetery. In 1920, Appin Women's Institute purchased cinders for the roadway and evergreen trees. In 1921, they donated \$100.00 for the erection of gates. And thirty-two years later (in 1952) when they finally saw those gates, they made another donation. The first lady to attend an annual meeting was Ivy Galbraith in 1946. It appears that she was a representative of the Appin Dramatic Club, which wanted to resurrect the gate-building project. Ivy was named to a gate committee whose work culminated in 1952 with the stone gates completed. Kathy Tunks has served as an auditor. In 1997 there was a giant leap forward when Marj Zavitz was appointed as the first female board director and Secretary-Treasurer. In 1999, Isabella Cass-Blackmore was appointed a director.

(11) I must draw your attention once more to two men. The first is Charlie Macfie. He was one of the original shareholders in 1914. He served as Secretary-Treasurer from 1914 to 1958 when he asked to be relieved of his duties. The board accepted his resignation "with regret". He had served for forty-four years.

The second is W.T. May (my grandfather). He, like Charlie, was one of the original shareholders. He served as President from 1914 to 1975 – sixty-one years. In those sixty-one years, he may have missed one meeting (in 1962). When he retired in 1975, the board made him Honorary Chairman.

(12) Service to Appin Cemetery has been very much a family affair and before I conclude, I would like to mention those families who have given generations of service as directors. There is a risk in doing this; the risk being that I will miss someone. But I would rather make that mistake and be corrected than not mention any. So alphabetically,

Allan - James Allan an original director, Murray and Stewart

- Blackmore - Isabella and Joel, who was elected President this year
- Carruthers - William E and Marjorie Zavitz, the Secretary-Treasurer
- Chisholm - Alex and Ed, who has served as Secretary-Treasurer
- Fletcher - Milton and Hugh
- Galbraith - Angus D., George, Lloyd and Bill
- Johnson - Martin Johnson an original director followed by Dunc and James D.
- Lotan - James Sr. an original director and James Jr.
- Macfie - James Macfie sold the land, Charlie and John Macfie, were both original directors, Ron and Duncan. Ron served as Secretary-Treasurer for twenty-seven years. Between Charlie and Ron Macfie, they served seventy-one years as Secretary-Treasurer
- May - W.T. May was an original director, John May and myself, Jim. John was President for twenty years and has a wealth of knowledge about the cemetery. Between W.T. and John May, they served eighty-one years as President
- McDonald - Stewart, Ron and Rick, Ron has served as President
- Pole - Stewart and Leonard
- Roemmele - Fred and Don, Don has served as Secretary-Treasurer

And of course, other individuals serve, as directors like:

Ken Carruthers
Dale Cushman
Les Stevenson
Leonard van der Hooft

In 1958, the directors passed a motion "to surrender the Charter of the Company and change to a Board of Trustees". However, they rescinded the motion and so today, Appin Cemetery is still "a limited company with shareholders". What dividends has this company paid for eighty-six years? They certainly can't be measured in dollars and cents.

I once heard a Jewish woman speak about surviving the Nazi death camps. Her family however had perished in those camps. She explained how important it was for her to place bricks bearing the names of her family in a holocaust wall of remembrance because they had had no cemetery. She, like Abraham, and we are no different, we all need a place that commemorates our families and neighbours. Has this not been a dividend of the Appin Cemetery Company?

Thorton Wilder's play "Our Town" is about a village like Appin. The third act is set in the graveyard on the hill above the village. The characters are the people buried there. One thing Wilder is telling us is that the cemetery — like Abraham's cave — helps us remember. It gives our families and our community a sense of our history — a sense of who we are.

Canadian novelist Margaret Lawrence when writing about the cemetery in her small hometown put it this way: because of the cemetery, the dead continue to live there too.